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SUBJECT: OMAN - PRAISE, CONCERNS GREET CAIRO SPEECH

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo has generated significant positive response in Oman. In the press, online, and in person, Omanis have been forthright in discussing the speech (a potential fourth avenue for expression, through the mosques, is unavailable, as content for worship is set well in advance by the Ministry of Religious Affairs). Editorials in state and private papers have been uncharacteristically timely and thoughtful; online forums have seen lively debate; and individual Omanis have expressed general admiration for the President and the speech, despite lingering questions, especially about Iran and the Palestinians. END SUMMARY.

IN THE PRESS: BOOSTING THE CHANCE FOR PEACE

¶2. (U) The President's Cairo speech received significant coverage in all media, virtually all drawn from wire service and other international reporting. Coverage led TV news Thursday night (unusual here, as Omani news is generally pre-eminent). Editorial content, starting in advance of the speech, was by local standards substantial, with state Arabic daily "Oman" leading off Thursday with a commentary, "Obama's Speech: Many Expectations and Positive Signs", pointing to "several encouraging signals indicating the U.S. President is truly starting a new chapter, one that certainly will not please Israel." Private Arabic daily "Al Watan" sounded a more cautious note on Friday that "pressures back in Washington ... strongly suggest that Obama will not be in a position to turn his words into deeds." "Oman" remained hopeful on Saturday, calling the speech "rather broad minded, with a vision capable of overcoming all the ordeals and calamities experienced in this vital region," adding that "the coming period will be decisive ... particularly in boosting the chance for peace in the region."

¶3. (U) Block Quotes:

Thursday, June 4, state Arabic daily "Oman" (circulation 38,000), "Obama's Speech: Many Expectations and Positive Signs", by columnist Abdelhamid al-Muwafi":

"There are several encouraging signals indicating that the U.S. President is truly starting a new chapter, one that certainly will not please Israel. Many hope that President Obama succeeds in directing American policy toward achieving a just peace and establishing stability in this vital region. Achieving such a goal would be, in his own words, in Arab, Israeli, American, and international interests. Still, we wonder: to what extent will Israel respond?"

Friday, June 5, private Arabic daily "al-Watan" (circulation 42,000), "Obama's Speech and the Scope of Hope":

"Despite the extreme suffering of the Palestinians under the Israeli occupation and the not-better situations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and all other Muslim nations Obama's speech seeks to offer hope... If the American President has already captivated the hearts at home with his sweet speeches, he is now seeking to become the messenger of

peace and leader of justice among all humankind. His speech was full of convincing tools, including verses from the Holy Quran and religious rhetoric. However, the real state of facts challenges Muslim and Arab desires to believe the speech. Pressures back in Washington, including warnings that the President should not apologize for acts the United States has committed and calls not to require halting settlements on Palestinian territories, strongly suggest that Obama will not be in a position to turn his words into deeds."

Saturday, June 6, state Arabic daily "Oman", "Chance for Peace in the Region Boosted Following Obama's Speech":

"No doubt Obama's speech was untraditional; it was rather broad-minded, with a vision capable of overcoming all the ordeals in this vital region and moving ahead, guided by clear principles binding all concerned parties - mainly Israel and the Palestinians - in preparation for getting the wheels of peace back on the rails... Regardless of some reactions by those whose differences with the former U.S. administration extend to this one, Obama's speech succeeded in ensuring a widespread positive response from the public and officially, in both the Arab and the Muslim world and even beyond... The coming period will be decisive, particularly in boosting the chance for peace in the region."

ONLINE: ENTHUSIASM TEMPERED BY DISAPPOINTMENT

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14. (U) On popular Omani discussion forums, enthusiasm for the speech and its message on the part of site moderators was at times offset by critical commentary from posters. Moderators on sites such as Al-Sablah (www.omania2.net) Farrq (www.farrq.net), and English Sabla (www.englishsabla.com) created threads in which to discuss the speech, some amplified with transcripts. Initial comments by moderators and leading commentators were positive: "The speech is a positive beginning of a new era in the Muslim-U.S. relationship that will hopefully be supported by new U.S. foreign policy principles" and "I followed Obama's speech in Cairo and I agree with every word he said." Dissenters soon countered that the speech "carried absolutely nothing new, with many words but no deeds," and accused the President of "overlooking the atrocities committed by the criminal Israeli regime, the last being the crimes committed against innocent men, women and children in Gaza." One commentator summed up his mixed feelings: "A decent speech. I was slightly disappointed though, because I expected more this time. He was very careful not to anger Israel or the Zionists in the U.S. Apart from that, I loved the way he put things in perspective."

IN PERSON: ADMIRATION AND CONCERN

15. (SBU) In sampling reactions from Embassy contacts at all levels, there is a clear admiration for the President simply for making this kind of speech ("He is so brave," said a teacher; "the speech was 99% on target," commented an Omani professional), even as there are quibbles ("the speech only dressed Bush policies in new clothes," said one government worker).

16. Sample quotes:

Member of the Majlis al-Shura (elected national assembly): "I was impressed by the reference to verses from the Holy Quran, which supports Obama's calls for mutual understanding."

Private-newspaper journalist: "A great speech from a master President. Yes, we have to work together."

Lawyer: "the speech repeats the lie that Arab countries view Iran as more dangerous than Israel, a false claim repeated by American agents in dictatorial regimes such as Egypt."

High-school teacher: "It is really great if people will work together to achieve these goals. I've asked many people and they all

like it."

College student: "It was a great speech about Islam and the relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world. It is a new kind of political speech by the U.S. to the Muslim people, and it has many things for us."

College student: "Man, he was great, and he looked confident. He wants to change. Let us sustain him and his ideas."

Homemaker: "What really matters to us was what he was going to say about Palestine, and in that regards he said nothing new."

COMMENT: OPENING DOORS, SETTING EXPECTATIONS

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The speech achieved a remarkable level of awareness in Oman, despite handicaps including locally inopportune timing at the start of the weekend and the Omani tendency to remain aloof from news outside the Sultanate. Moving forward, press commentary and public conversation alike should continue well into the coming week. Conversations with Omanis make it clear that generally upbeat initial reactions are accompanied by high expectations for concrete results. "It was a great speech", said one young Omani, "but we've had speeches before; now it's time for action." END COMMENT.
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